Of the many slow, concentrated moments in Gheith Al-Amine’s *Once Upon a Sidewalk* (2009), there is a particularly tongue-in-cheek sequence in which an intimate shot of a woman’s face aligns with an excerpt from Chet Baker’s “My Funny Valentine.” As her visage inches across the screen, temporally dislodged by slow-motion, the ghostly atmospherics of Baker’s vocals begin to simmer in the mind. “Your looks are laughable, un-photographable,” he croons, “yet, you’re my favorite work of art.” This has the effect of inviting a deep and possessive male gaze while, at the same time, inflecting that gaze with an initial paradox – the dichotomy that exists between a woman’s appearance and her inner qualities of character. Male gaze and, by extension, desire are placed under suspicion in Al-Amine’s film. In Akram Zaatari’s *Majnounak* (1997), a similar matter prevails. Whereas the suspicion in *Once Upon a Sidewalk* is directed towards the spectator, the suspicion in *Majnounak* resides within the subjects depicted on screen. Their well-groomed and machismo-laden appearances serve as pretexts to rather unsavory accounts of relationships, while their claims of tenderness, as well as their conceptions of romance, are used to justify sexual exploitation.

Because these works both represent different social-sexual climates in Beirut, and because they take place in the decades following Lebanon’s civil war (1975-1990), I see the issues raised as belonging to a distinctively “postwar” period in history (Shehadeh 215). The formal experimentation of Al-Amine and Zaatari may discourage historical and political readings, but they do not render the abstractions of Lebanese social climates as purely subjective and social phenomena. When it comes to the notions of gender identity advocated by the subjects in the videos, in fact, the connotation becomes laden with embodied history. This essay will chart the historical factors that contribute to postwar gender values in Lebanon, and incorporate them
with social and psychological factors more apparent in the formal qualities of the videos. In this way, it will progress from a historical perspective to a perspective rooted in the studies of contemporary media arts – the latter being a more enlightening and definitive method of analysis. Following this trajectory, we will see how the desiring male has come to be reared in postwar society, how he comes to approach women, and, additionally, how women determine desires of their own. This paper will further examine how the desires of men and women in Lebanon are articulated by the subjects in the videos, and how they are subverted by the stylistic devices used by the makers.

To consider desire and its social regulation (within the parameters of law, religion, or elsewhere), it is first useful to recall the matters of patriarchies in Lebanese society. These long-respected hierarchies of family place men and seniors at the top, and often permit, in the interest of traditional familial values, the subjugation of women. Patriarchies also imply that men have priority in expressing their desires, and that women – having to first consider the family’s values of honor – must demarcate urges accordingly (Joseph 87-88). Beyond their roots in tradition, patriarchies are of interest to this study because of the role they upheld in Lebanon’s national crisis of civil war. Here, in the form of the “neo-patriarchy,” male-centric hierarchies dictated the operations of the warring militias (Haugbolle 128). Despite this fact, the fifteen-year-long war actually played a major role in liberation of women (Shehadeh 215). The constant disintegration and reinstatement of parties, as well as the stakes lost and gained in educational, economic, and military sectors, often left ground wide open for institutional reconfiguration. Many women were subsequently driven into the public sphere, where they could assert positions of dominance and expand their networks of desire (Shehadeh 215). As we examine the women of Al-Amine’s postwar-period work, however, we must also hold in our minds the prolonged effects of civil war. These are revealed in one 2006 report concerning unspoken sexual desire among students at the American University of Beirut, in which teacher and anthropologist Roseanne Saad Khalaf writes of the many students who continue to wrestle with
the memory of Lebanon’s war-torn past (177). “It seems that war and violence are never far away,” one of her students remarked (177). Indeed, the “legacy” of the civil war (as it is commonly referred to in anthropological literature) has instilled fears of future conflict since the civil war’s end in 1990 (Haugbolle 131), described either as a lingering part of the collective imagination, or as a physical remnant of the past. Sune Haugbolle puts the matter into the perspective of daily life when he states, “It is often said in Lebanon that your taxi driver probably was a militiaman during the war” (126). Of course, when not confronted with a living embodiment of fear on a daily basis, and when tending towards an inability or unwillingness to tackle fear as a social issue, the people of Lebanon may also exhibit a public form of amnesia (Haugbolle 117-118). They may choose to suppress the matter altogether and, as a result, may see postwar symptoms manifested in new cultural schizophrenias (Haugbolle 118).

For the man in Lebanon, this results in “differing and paradoxical cultural norms of accepted gendered behavior” (Haugbolle 118), particularly those associated with the “militiaman” identity. The militiaman’s iconic status postwar Lebanon is well known, immortalized in books, songs, and posters, but as a masculine identity it has become cause for contradiction, either condemned in a national context or celebrated amongst social institutions (Hourani). In Lebanon’s popular postwar cinema, furthermore, depictions of the militiaman are said to be depictions of a “fractured” masculinity (Khatib 107). In the war films of Lebanese director Maroun Baghdadi, for example, Lina Khatib describes the militaristic male characters as violent men and frightened little boys. They are beset by anxieties. Their fears are nurtured within their imaginations. In acting out their desires they perform within a structure of violence and obsession. […] They are trapped in a state of maleness that is neither stable nor desired. (120)

Nevertheless, the militiaman narrative that dominates contemporary art and culture is usually the narrative of redemption (Haugbolle 117). Overt displays of masculinity in Lebanese culture are usually classified under justified acts of heroism, because they are so often equated with the
acts of valor and daring performed by the militiaman. In *Majnounak*, the desire to live up to the assumed heroic persona is implied but never explicitly expressed. Instead, Zaatari splices video game footage between the shots of his interviews, thereby drawing parallels between the daring rescue of a digital “damsel in distress” and the personal accounts of successful (albeit awkward) sexual conquests. The idea of militaristic heroism, if it is ever thought of in *Majnounak*, lies only in the determination towards an end goal, or, rather, the obstinate insistences on sexual gratification. Lila Abu-Lughod echoes this male text by connecting it to the rescue motif seen in the popular Arab imagination, which implies that Arab women exist as oppressed victims, “having too little agency and therefore needing help” (qtd. in Joseph 10). This motif is said to stem from patriarchal traditions that equate women with culture, and is said to become man’s means of justifying his masculine behavior, whether that behavior takes place in the violence of war or in everyday forms of domination (qtd. in Joseph 12). Abu-Lughod’s argument holds weight in the case of *Majnounak* because Zaatari, confident in his symbolic approach, chooses to display woman on screen only in the form of a helpless video game character. In this way, the woman becomes a relic of the popular media – a sacred object of culture serving only to validate the exploits of the man.

Beyond her polygonal form, however, Zaatari’s woman is also heard in the occasional interjections of a voice-over. Like the woman held at knifepoint in the video game, this voice offers little evidence of personal agency – she speaks robotically, and with no detectable tone or inflection. But rather than existing passively or in a state of distress, this version of woman is one who demands something of man. This version of woman beckons to man for attention, and, by promising him the fulfillment of his fantasies, advises him towards his perfected self (“I want you stronger”). Thus, the (disembodied) woman in *Majnounak* also comes to dictate the desires of the man. Like the woman described in the old Islamic texts interpreted by anthropologist Suad Joseph, Zaatari’s voice-over seduces with an “erotic force,” and thereby eradicates the “rational intellect” of man (Joseph 100). She manifests herself as the voice inside his head,
advising him to take anabolic steroids in order to perfect his figure, or asking him to “save her” and become the hero he imagines. By urging man towards the role of hero, the woman also urges man towards the role of the militiaman – towards the fulfillment of the Lebanese cultural text, where he is “prepared to relinquish self-control to satisfy the need to dominate, even at the cost of [his] humanity” (Khatib 120). The women mentioned in the interviews of Majnounak are not desired outcomes; instead, they are man’s pitfall.

In the street scene of Once Upon a Sidewalk, women overwhelm the agency of man by dissolving his cognition. Like Zaatari’s omnipresent woman they become the sirens that lure man to his certain doom. They are also like the women hinted at in the anecdotes of Majnounak because they are suggested as being interchangeable. They appear in a single street scene over which Al-Amine obsesses and, in turn, they serve as placeholders for the different surrogate actresses. For the director, this is an exercise in capturing a different feeling or tone with each and every re-creation. Along with the slow, shifting, and sultry effects of slow-motion that render woman uniquely ephemeral, this is also an exercise in turning the female identity fluid. The women in Once Upon a Sidewalk are ever-changing and unpredictable to man, perhaps even reflective of their pasts within patriarchal society, in which “women lost or gained authority more frequently and conditionally than men” (Joseph 88). Here, however, woman’s authority is more defined, and it is a cause for unrequited desire and delusion in men.

In Once Upon a Sidewalk, we might also say that women mediate male desires by assuming “gatekeeper” roles – by embracing proclivities for self-choice (Davis 162). Women hold the information required to contextualize Al-Amine’s street scene, for example. One of them reveals to the cameraman (who is unidentified, but context suggests he is Al-Amine) that filming for the Future TV channel is taking place, and thus makes a conscious decision to bring him up to speed with the situation. Whereas the man is reliant on the woman in order to gain access to the conversation, however, the woman already embodies the knowledge, and has the choice of whether or not to divulge it. Whereas the male’s desires center on his dependency
towards an other, the female’s desires may operate entirely within her own facilities. Out of
these revelations, certain psychologists may see the chance to employ mirror theory – a theory
that envisions partners in a relationship as being individuals who “reflect” each other, and who
reciprocate their feelings of self (Joseph 86). Anthropologist Suad Joseph, in her study of Middle
Eastern citizenship, appropriates this theory for Lebanon: “In Lebanon, a widely supported
construct of selfhood is relational; it is constructed and maintained in reference to specific
connections with others” (9). In reflecting on her ethnographic examination of “desiring” subjects
in Lebanon, Joseph adds: “Persons came to know their desires as they were reflected, mirrored,
or offered in the statements and actions of others” (Joseph 86).

In place of the male “other” in Once Upon a Sidewalk, Al-Amine places a literal mirror in
front of the camera and achieves an effect that subverts popular theories. The female subjects
speak to the suggestion of a male presence off-screen, yes, but their interface with his
perceptual self is diluted through a series of “reflections” – those created by the mirror and by
the materiality of video itself – that abstract the suggestion of a male figure. As a result, the
confessions of the women are lost when directed at the male; the interviews allow the women to
reconcile not with a partner, but with self as it is reflected. For many of the women, this is a self
to be proud of; this is a self imbued with the glow of a newfound womanhood and of newfound
confidence. If a man is ever the main focus of desire for the women in Al-Amine’s film, it is
because man guides the woman on the path to her own maturity – man allows the woman a
chance at her first sexual experiences, and a chance to come into possession of her own
powers and desires (Davis 162). This is exemplified by the woman who tells of one of her
earliest adolescent experiences with the other gender. “A guy living nearby fell in love with me,”
she recalls, smiling to herself; “this is when I realized I was a woman!”

It is clear in Once Upon a Sidewalk that the notion of womanhood and the articulation of
identity can be internalized by the woman, but in the case of Majnounak and the man, identity is
something affirmed through performance. Indeed, there is no aura of mystique surrounding
Zaatari’s interview subjects, no veil suggested by the properties of a mirror or by the aesthetic of video footage. The men of Majnounak are encouraged to express their own ideas of self – those manifested in body image, in material possessions, and in storytelling ability. These aspects of selfhood are of particular interest because they become the “most fulfilling” forms of spectacle in Zaatari’s video (Khatib 105), as well those manipulated with the most conscious acknowledgement of social “script” (Haugbolle 119). Like one man’s tattoo of an eagle holding a snake, or another man’s motorbike, then, the pursuit of the woman is carried out in accordance with the Lebanese notion of male valor. Abu-Lughod acknowledges this fact when she explains that the relation of the Lebanese male to the female is built around the narrative of a daring rescue (in Joseph 10). Additionally, Joseph’s ethnography “Learning Desire” reveals trends that situate the man as the “initiator” in the relationship (100) – the one who makes the first move. For the subjects of Zaatari’s interviews, a certain level of pride is exuded when they regale the camera with the specific “moves” they make. Living up to the Lebanese social text, as it were, and playing a hero under the guise of a suitor, is a self-fulfilling performance. When the men begin to detail the experiences of their relationships following the initial sexual encounter, however, their stories begin to lose their coherence. They begin to express a loss of interest in their partners, as well as a slow, inevitable degradation of social interaction, thereby denoting a dismissal of the patriarchal right to female possession, as well as a dismissal of any self-identification. If the man in Once Upon a Sidewalk looks upon the woman for an affirmation of the self, then, the man in Majnounak embraces woman in a ritual loss of self. The man in Majnounak affirms himself only in his self-obsession – in his fixation on body image and material possessions.

To assume the role of hero, as it is implied in Zaatari’s video, is to assume what came with the implications of a hero during the time of Lebanon’s civil war. It is to represent the traits that are valued by social institutions, but also to submit to a fate in which man must be “prepared to relinquish self-control to satisfy the need to dominate, even at the cost of [his]
humanity” (Khatib 120). I refer, of course, to the fate that followed the militiaman during the civil war in Lebanon, and the fate extended by artists like Zaatari into the mortal realm of postwar society. For the women of Al-Amine’s Once Upon a Sidewalk, the civil war exists only as a minor memory. More importantly, however, the civil war instantiated as a period of daring new assuredness for the Lebanese woman. When Al-Amine chooses to isolate the new Lebanese woman in private confessional, this assuredness is translated as intrinsic component of self-identity. In the re-created street scenes, this assuredness gives the new Lebanese woman the composure needed to own the self, as well as the mystique needed to rebuff any attempts of ownership by the man. It can be seen, in this sense, how woman embodies a control over desire. The voice of the woman in Majnounak doesn’t need the male to save her; the voice wants the male to save her. The Lebanese woman can make conscious decisions to invite the man in, thereby acting on desire, or to keep the man out, thereby subjugating desire under other facets of human agency. These decisions represent a new agency of desire, one that circumvents the old and dated approaches to human impulse, whether it is the war-era trend of “gendered” desires, or the male-oriented trend of hopeless desire.
Works Cited


